



# **"In the Eye of the Beholder": A New Approach to Studying Folk Theories of Leadership**

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## **Executive Summary**

Awareness that questionnaire ratings of leaders may be subject to systematic errors has led to increased emphasis on understanding the perceptual/memory processes underlying leadership ratings. Subordinates may judge leadership effectiveness based on their implicit leadership theories. *Folk theories of leadership* refers to these deeply felt and idiosyncratic theories of leadership behaviors. Borman's (1983) "Trait-Implication Procedure" based on Kelly's Repertory Grid technique was used to examine the leadership categorization schema of ten senior executives from a wide variety of organizations. Results indicate some association between the folk theories of leadership and the background/experience of the respondent. Implications of these findings for future research and practice are discussed.

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Implicit or "naive" leadership theories (ILT) have received considerable attention from researchers to understand causal attributions and perceptions about the focal leader (Lord and Maher, 1993; Phillips, 1984). While the initial focus of research on ILT was to demonstrate its affect on subjects' responses to descriptive questionnaires (Eden and Leviatan, 1975; Gioia and Sims, 1985; Larson, 1982; Phillips and Lord, 1986), recent empirical investigations have focused on understanding the processes underlying leadership emergence and acceptance at both the individual and group level (Gerstner and Day, 1994; Hall and Lord, 1995). This paper attempts to provide a new wrinkle to this line of inquiry by uncovering the mental models of leadership at the individual level using Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs and relating them to subject's background and experience to better understand the origins of the leadership schema.

While leadership researchers have difficulty coming to an agreement as to what leadership really is, the popular press and the general public seem to have no trouble with the concept. They seem to carry specific notions of what leadership is all about. These deeply felt and many times, idiosyncratic theories of leadership reflecting the content of a leadership category system is referred to in this paper as "folk theories of leadership," reflecting the reality that leadership, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder. This categorization schema guides the perceptions and behaviors of people by selectively controlling attention to, encoding of, and retrieval of leadership-relevant information. Borman (1983) suggests a procedure based on Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory to elicit the individual categorization system. This study uses Borman's procedure to examine individual differences in the construct system that may aid in understanding leadership emergence and acceptance.

## Literature Review

### Social Cognition and Leadership Perceptions

The great relevance of leadership as an organizational science concept is that it is descriptive of how participants and observers understand, interpret, and give meaning to organizational activities and outcomes (Calder, 1977; Meindl, 1990; Pfeffer, 1977). Calder (1977) posits leadership as an unobservable personal quality that is inferred from observed and assumed behavior as well as the consequences associated with that behavior. According to this view of leadership, evidential behaviors and outcomes create leadership perceptions when they match the perceivers' implicit theories concerning outcomes and behaviors associated with leadership. A similar view is held by Pfeffer (1977) who maintains that leadership is a social construction used by observers to make sense out of past events. That is, positive or negative leadership behavior is inferred when salient actors are seen as causal agents.

In complex social environments, individuals are often deluged with stimuli from the environment which has to be received, encoded, and stored as information for future retrieval and action. The limited cognitive capacity of human observers to process this plethora of information results in a need to employ

information simplification heuristic in order to effectively manage the complex information processing requirements (Phillips, 1984). Memory schemata are thought to be the cognitive organizing systems/categories that persons use to organize and simplify the complex and varied interpersonal information present in a social context (Cantor and Mischel, 1977). The memory-schemata framework provides the subordinates with an efficient means of storing leader-relevant information by categorizing the stimuli on the basis of their similarity to a leadership prototype (Lord, Foti, and Phillips, 1981). The subordinates then rely extensively on leadership prototypes when asked to recall information about a specific leader. This serves as a threat to descriptive accuracy given Cantor and Mischel's (1977) caution that people frequently have difficulty separating stimulus information from schematic information, leading to errors in recall of leader behavior. Of equal concern is that simplified categorization of a multi-attribute stimuli into fewer, distinctive attributes may cause rating errors such as halo (Feldman, 1981).

Many researchers and theorists are in agreement that subordinate responses to leadership questionnaires are of questionable validity as the ratings are mediated by a generalized leadership impression resulting from the confluence of available information about the leader's behavior (Lord, Foti, and DeVader, 1984). A variety of cognitive processes are known to kindle, filter, influence, adjust or completely determine perceptions of leadership. For example, if ease of accessing leader-relevant information is related to frequency judgements through reliance on the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahnemann, 1973), more prototypical behaviors will likely be judged to occur more frequently. Such heuristic could have a potential biasing effect on the frequency rating scales utilized in most descriptive leader behavior questionnaires (Lord, Foti, and De Vader, 1984).

### Cognitive Categorization and Accuracy of Leadership Ratings

Rosch (1978) maintains that one of the most basic tasks of all organisms is to segment the environment into classifications or categories by which non-identical stimuli can be treated as equivalent. A prototypical object or person is an abstract composite of the most representative attributes of category members. Hence a car and a truck could both be classified as "vehicles" as they share the common attributes of moving on wheels and are powered by a gasoline engine. Cantor and Mischel (1977; 1979) applied the concepts of prototypicality and stimuli categorization to interpersonal situations (Rosch's work dealt with perceptions of objects). Through prototypes, observers (subordinates) are able to sort and store new stimuli; rely on the label itself to recall information about a particular stimulus (leader); and readily develop associated interpretations from the category's label even though many of the original inputs are unavailable. Applying the cognitive categorization models (Cantor and Mischel, 1977; Rosch, 1978) Lord, Foti, and Phillips (1982) explained leadership perceptions as a cognitive process based on a comparison of the person being judged with category prototypes. Subsequent evaluations of leadership behavior are based on category prototypes, and not on actual stimulus behaviors.

This reliance on automated information processing (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977) means that subordinates do not require constant monitoring of leader behavior and make judgements based on prototypical information already stored in their long-term memory (Foti, Fraser, and Lord, 1982; Lord, Foti, and De Vader, 1984). Phillips and Lord (1982) found that subjects viewing a 15 minute videotape of a four person problem solving group, relied on a leadership prototype when completing the leader behavior descriptive questionnaire. Specifically, subjects exhibited less differentiation between observed and unobserved behaviors when these behaviors were prototypic of effective or ineffective leaders than when the behaviors were nonprototypic. Lord, Foti, and De Vader (1984) conducted a series of tests to validate the theory of internal structure of leadership categories. They found evidence suggesting that attributes are arranged within categories from most prototypical to least prototypical. They also found that stimulus prototypicality affected leadership perceptions. That is, how closely the observed leader behavior is perceived to resemble prototypical behavior (of a leader) will determine whether the person is perceived as a leader or not. Other researchers have examined the distortions in leadership ratings caused by bogus performance feedback (Phillips and Lord, 1981, 1982; Rush and Beauvais, 1981), effect of time delay in leadership ratings (Phillips, 1984), and the specific information processing models used in leadership and social perceptions (Lord and Alliger, 1985).

It should be pointed out that a measure that closely matches the observers' cognitive schemata will facilitate the use of heuristic information processes to respond to the instrument. The use of heuristic information processes may produce high internal consistency but may also produce systematic distortions. Rush and Beauvais (1981) question the assumed phenomenological independence of performance and behavioral information. They found that raters watching an identical videotape could be influenced to systematically distort attributions of performance based on bogus information. The question of phenomenological independence of performance and behavioral information can be demonstrated by considering the work of Bass and his associates (Bass, Waldman, Avolio, and Bebb, 1987; Hater and Bass, 1988; Waldman, Bass, and Einstein, 1987). They have consistently found support for the superiority of transformational leadership in achieving higher subordinate performance and satisfaction. A possible explanation for the consistent empirical results can be offered from the cognitive categorization perspective which maintains that human observers, due to their tendency to engage in information simplification, may link good performance with the prototype of a good leader and rate the behavioral items accordingly. Some support for this assertion is provided by Bass and Avolio (1989) who found that a measure of prototypicality was strongly associated with transformational leadership and self-reported outcome measures.

### **Individual Differences in Cognitive Categorization**

Several researchers have examined the relationship between response prototypicality and individual characteristics such as cognitive complexity, thinking and decision styles, experience and gender and found only mixed

support for the central assertion of the information processing theory that the extent of differentiation in the category system will be determined by the focal individual's cognitive complexity. Weiss and Adler (1982) found that cognitive complexity had no impact on the subjects' implicit leadership theory. While the leadership dimensions across the low and high complexity groups were extremely stable, there was some indication that the potential for error in respondent-derived leadership scores resulting from the subjects' cognitive organization systems may be less of a problem when the subjects are experienced. Eden and Leviatan (1975) also found no support for their hypothesis that experience and background may have an impact on the respondent-derived leadership dimensions. In fact, the factor structure got messier for the experienced group as compared to the inexperienced group.

Atwater and Yammarino (1993) found that the focal leader's intelligence and emotional coping predicted subordinate ratings of leadership while conformity and behavioral coping predicted superior ratings of leadership. These results provide some support for the prototypicality explanation where the prototypes are determined by the level in the organization's hierarchy. Graves and Powell (1982) found systematic differences in the traits of an effective leader described by male and female undergraduate students. Males identified more instrumental traits while females mentioned expressive traits. These and several other studies indicate that ILTs may be influenced by individual characteristics but the specificity of predictors may depend upon the contextual factors such as leader-familiarity, performance information available, and so on.

### Personal Construct Theory and the Repertory Grid Technique

Kelly (1955), as part of his psychological theory of cognition, observed that each person evolves construction systems reflecting his or her personal way of viewing and interpreting events and other persons' activities. His concept of personal constructs is very similar to the notion of categorization (Cantor and Mischel, 1977) and prototypes (Rosch, 1978), in that his personal construct theory posits that construction systems for individuals within a "focus of convenience" aid in information organization and simplification. Of central importance for the present purpose is that personal construct systems are imposed on the observers' perceptions of other persons. These interpersonal filters may influence observations and judgement about other people by providing the frame-of-reference to receive and interpret this information consistent with their own constructs (Borman, 1987).

The repertory grid technique was first developed by Kelly (1955) to operationalize his personal construct theory. Kelly was interested in developing instruments that would reliably elicit the subject's cognitive structure, and in which the researcher's frame-of-reference and world-view must take into account, the person's abstractions and generalizations about him- or herself. Structured protocols artificially restrict and may unduly reduce many of the individual differences that might appear in a less structured instrument. Unlike traditional open-ended questions, the repertory grid technique enables the

researcher to apply sophisticated qualitative and quantitative analysis, while retaining the advantages of free response method.

The repertory grid technique involves three steps: (1) identifying the elements (leaders) used by subjects to elicit the constructs that allow for cognitive organization, (2) eliciting constructs using one of many forms available, and (3) eliciting perceptions of elements on each construct elicited in step (2). The elements are usually identified by the subject as familiarity with the elements is one of the key requirements to identify the personal constructs. Of the many variations on the repertory grid technique that have been used in past research, Reger (1990) describes three widely used forms: the minimum context form, the sequential form, and the full context form. Only the minimum context form is discussed here (For a review of the other two forms, refer to Reger (1990).

In the minimum context form, the subject examines a set of three elements at a time and identifies two elements that are most similar and thereby different from the third. Alternatively, the subject may be presented with a triad where the similarities and differences are already identified (an approach used in this study). The subject is then asked to "identify an important way in which two of them are alike and thereby different from the third." For example, in this study, the subject is presented with a set of three self-identified leaders at a time and asked to indicate how two of them (pre-identified by the researcher) are similar and, at the same time, different from the third. The researcher can decide to stop further presentation of triads when satisfied that all relevant constructs have been identified. The dimensionality of personal constructs can be examined by asking people to rate each element of a set of constructs, then factoring or clustering the constructs. This method has been used in research on cognitive complexity, with some subjects' ratings yielding complex multi-factor solutions and others more simple one or two factor solutions (Adams-Webber, 1979). Even though direct comparison of the content of the personal construct systems is questionable under the strictest interpretation of Kelly's (1955) theories, his commonality corollary (1955: p90) and sociality corollary (1955: p 95) provide some theoretical basis to do so.

A simple "trait-implication procedure" described in Borman (1983, 1987) allows us to numerically define the individual categories on the basis of each of their own definitions and compare the content of construct systems across individuals. In this procedure, a subject is asked to first identify the constructs using the repertory grid, and then define his or her own constructs according to the perceived similarity between each construct and a set of reference concepts provided by the researcher. This trait-implication is necessary to ensure equivalence in the meaning of constructs provided by the same or different respondent(s). If two constructs are perceived as similar to an identical set of reference concepts, the two constructs are assumed to represent a common higher-order construction system. This subject generated numerical depiction of individual constructs paves the way for correlational analysis to index similarity in the content of the constructs (Borman, 1983).

## **Research Proposition**

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The primary objective of this study is to uncover the mental models or folk theories of leadership that subjects carry around in their heads. As an initial attempt to explain the derived category system, the subjects' background and experience will be studied to understand their influence on the development of the subject's folk theories of leadership. The sample size is too small to conduct any statistical tests of the hypothesis; instead, an effort will be made to understand each subject, thereby gaining the advantages of a case study method within the quantitative epistemological framework.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

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Ten attendees of a leadership training program at a public university in the North Eastern U.S. volunteered to participate in the study. All of them had more than ten years of managerial experience and were from a diverse set of functional and organizational backgrounds. The questionnaires were administered during the first hour of their two-day training program to ensure that the training program content did not influence their ability to recall and record leadership behaviors. The participants represented a wide variety of organizations, both public (not-for-profit) and private. One of the participants was an Asian-American and the rest were Caucasians. Two were women. Completion time was approximately 60 minutes. One of the researchers provided step-by-step verbal instructions to the respondent group and ensured that the Repertory-Grid and the Trait-Implication matrix were completed according to the instructions provided.

### **Instrument**

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The survey instrument was in three parts: Part I dealt with eliciting the elements and identifying the constructs. At least four leaders whom the participants had known quite well and had the opportunity to observe in their leadership-role context were identified by the subjects. Excepting in one case when the subject chose the priest of the local parish, all referent-leaders chosen were either co-workers or superiors. Six triads were pre-identified; this combination was obtained by ensuring that no two leaders were paired together (as similar) more than once, that all possible pairs were included, and that no two elements were compared more than twice.

Part II elicited ratings of similarity of each construct to a set of reference concepts on a 5-point likert type scale with anchors "My word/phrase and the given key word/phrase are completely different in meaning" and "My word/phrase and the given key word/phrase are very similar in meaning". A set of 44 concepts (listed in Appendix I) including such words and phrases as intelligent, honest, clarifies ideas, trustworthy, well-groomed and insightful were identified by the researchers. The list of 59 prototypical traits identified by Lord, Foti, and De Vader (1984) was initially consulted to draw up the set of reference

concepts. Additional items were generated by reviewing the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1990) and the Leader-Behavior Description Questionnaire (Stogdill, 1963). Care was taken to ensure that the set of referent concepts included the complete set of prototypical traits and behaviors as identified by prior research (Lord et al., 1984; Offermann, Kennedy & Wirtz, 1994). Part III collected pertinent biographical information about the subject.

## **Analysis**

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In all, sixty five words/phrases (constructs) were generated by the ten subjects. One participant identified only four unique constructs while five participants generated eight constructs each. Correlations between the constructs were computed based on the similarity ratings of the 44 reference concepts provided by the researchers ( $N = 44$ ) thus generating a 65 x 65 correlation matrix. This correlation matrix was subject to a factor analysis using the principal components extraction and varimax rotation method. The scree plot of eigen values was used to determine the number of factors extracted. Since each construct can be uniquely related to each subject, the distribution of individual constructs across common dimensions was analyzed from the view point of both interpretability and distinctiveness.

## **Results**

The responses from the ten participants were subjected to a factor analysis. Seventeen factors with eigen value greater than 1.0 were extracted, explaining 85.2% of the variance in the data. A careful examination of the scree plot suggested that an eleven-factor solution is optimal as indicated by the kink in the plot at that factor level. The total variance explained by the eleven factors was 73.5%. The content of each factor was examined and the factor was given a label to best represent the content. Details of the factor structure are given in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 2, factors 2 through 8 were more commonly represented in the construct system of the participants. These factors roughly correspond to the transformational and transactional leadership factors identified by Bass (1985) as well as the initiating structure-consideration factors of the Ohio State University studies. The most common folk theories of leadership that people "carry in their heads" as indicated by our results are task master, insightful expert, genuinely warm, dedicated manager, value centered and visionary. Nine out of ten subjects had at least one of these factors represented in their personal construct system.

TABLE 1  
CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF FOLK THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP<sup>(1)</sup>

<u>Factor 1: PEOPLE-ORIENTED</u>	<u>Factor 4: DEDICATED MANAGER</u>	<u>Factor 7: VALUE-CENTERED</u>
Understanding (.85)	Dedicated; work long hours (.80)	Religious (.72)
Good people skills (.82)	Dedicated; hard working (.73)	Caring (.68)
Caring (.80)	Structured; less adaptable (.71)	Family oriented (.62)
Flexible (.78)	Focused (.61)	Available to others (.55)
Informal (.64)	Manage independently (.60)	Inspirational (.51)
Task-oriented (-.64)	Administratively efficient (.55)	Caring and warm (.48)
Bottom-line directed (-.58)	Strategic Planner (.45)	Attract followers (.46)
	Ambitious (.45)	
	Considerate (-.39)	<u>Factor 8: VISIONARY</u>
<u>Factor 2: TASK MASTER</u>		Committed (.74)
Authoritative (.75)	<u>Factor 5: INSIGHTFUL EXPERT</u>	Optimistic (.58)
Decisive (.68)	Politically astute (.76)	Dreamer (.55)
Impulsive (.67)	Less academic (.72)	Strong Vision (.55)
Strong convictions (.63)	Deep thinker (.62)	Evangelistic (.53)
Exploiter of Advantages (.61)	Reflective (.58)	
Forceful (.60)	Subject-matter-expert (.57)	<u>Factor 9: INSPIRATIONAL</u>
In control (.58)	Insightful (.49)	Inspirational (.76)
Goal directed (.41)	Decisive (.47)	Visionary (.69)
Good listener (-.47)		Outgoing (.48)
	<u>Factor 6: GENUINELY WARM</u>	
<u>Factor 3: PLANNER</u>	Convivial (.79)	<u>Factor 10: INTROVERT</u>
Organized (.83)	Open and friendly (.71)	Complacent (.82)
Independent (.76)	Outgoing; people oriented (.65)	Shyness (.67)
Self directed (.70)	Emotional (.65)	
Organizational skills (.62)	Outgoing style (.55)	<u>Factor 11: POLISHED</u>
Focused (.58)		Manipulative (-.71)
Idealist (.58)		Polished (.49)
Organized (.50)		Self Assured (.47)
Analytical (.42)		

(1) Only the content of the factor on which the personal constructs uniquely loaded are shown above for improved presentation. Factor loadings are given in parentheses. A full account of the factor analytic results are available from the authors upon request.

Of the eight factors uncovered in the study by Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz (1994), six factors were comparable to those identified in this study. They are sensitivity (people-oriented and genuinely warm), dedication (dedicated manager), tyranny (task master), charisma (visionary and value-centered), attractiveness (polished) and intelligence (insightful expert). The two factors unrepresented in the personal construct systems of this study's participants were masculinity and strength. Such a convergence in results across two studies using different methodologies is encouraging, especially given the fact that our results were based upon responses from only ten subjects.

In an effort to better understand the individual construct systems (or cognitive categories), each subject is briefly profiled followed by a description of their personal construct system. Names have been altered to maintain confidentiality of the respondent. The order of description in the following paragraphs follows the presentation order in Table 2.

John is an entrepreneur who recently became the President of his family-owned small business. He has over 20 years of experience working with his father. He identified five constructs all of which loaded on to the first dimension labeled "People oriented." His simple personal construct system indicates that he views **only** considerate behavior as an exemplar of effective leadership.

Beth is a senior administrator of the local school district with over 30 years of experience. She has been in her current position for over ten years and has responsibility for managing some of the new programs at the school. Ten employees directly report to her. The four constructs she identified represented three dimensions of leadership: task master, insightful expert and visionary. Her personal construct system is relatively more complex and she is more likely to consider a range of behaviors, both transformational and transactional (Bass, 1985) as indicative of effective leadership.

George, senior manager of in-patient programs at a large medical center, has over 40 years of experience and has been in the current position for over 6 years. He supervises over 100 employees. His personal construct system of leadership consists of three dimensions, namely, task master, planner, and value-centered. Five of his eight constructs loaded on to the "planner" dimension. These results indicate that he is more likely to view "work facilitation" (Bowers and Seashore, 1966) as the primary leadership factor.

Kevin is a psychologist and trainer with over 10 years of experience. The five constructs identified by him represented three dimensions: insightful expert, value-centered and visionary. His personal construct system has a primary emphasis on transformational leadership behaviors (Bass, 1985) and he is more likely to identify people displaying these behaviors as leaders.

Karl is a specialist in matching students with community projects for a national organization and supervises over 15 people at any given time. His personal construct system includes the following three leadership dimensions: people

TABLE 2  
PERSONAL CONSTRUCT SYSTEMS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS<sup>(1)</sup>

Participant	Dimension										Eigen Value	% Variance				
	People-Oriented	Task Master	Planner	Dedicated Manager	Insightful Expert	Genuinely Warm	Value Centered	Visionary	Inspirational	Introversive			Polished			
1. John	5															
2. Beth		1			2				1							
3. George		1	5				2									
4. Kevin					1		2		2							
5. Karl	2								1		2					
6. Meegan										1		2			1	
7. Ken			2						2		1					
8. Martin		2														1
9. Don		2			1					1				1		2
10. Francis		3	1									1				
Eigen Value	12.18	9.40	5.84	3.68	3.14	2.87	2.72	2.13	2.07	1.93	1.78					
% Variance	18.7	14.5	9.0	5.7	4.8	4.4	4.2	3.3	3.2	3.0	2.7					

<sup>(1)</sup> Cell values are the number of constructs that loaded on to each dimension.

oriented, visionary and inspirational. Like Kevin, he is also likely to view **only** transformational leadership behaviors as effective leadership behaviors.

Meegan, the administrative director of a large clinical laboratory, has been in her current position for over 5 years, and supervises over 100 employees. She identified six constructs which represented four distinctive leadership dimensions. They are dedicated manager, genuinely warm, value-centered and introvert. Traits and behaviors representative of a "dedicated" and "value-centered" leader seem to be more salient, and she is more likely to view employees displaying these characteristics as leaders.

Ken, a senior divisional manager in a large, diversified company, has worked in manufacturing for over 40 years. He has been in the current position for less than two years where he supervises over 180 employees. Seven of the eight constructs identified by him represented three dimensions, namely, planner, dedicated manager and genuinely warm. The fourth dimension of his personal construct system is "value-centered." His leadership role-model seems to be a supportive and dedicated person who is excellent in planning skills.

Martin is a human resources specialist with over 15 years of experience in both manufacturing and service companies. The eight constructs identified by him loaded on to four leadership dimensions. These were task master, dedicated manager, insightful expert and polished. According to him, goal orientation, dedication and expertise seem to be the differentiating characteristics between an effective and ineffective leader.

Don, a senior manager in a health services organization, has over 20 years of experience in the field and supervises over 150 employees. He identified eight constructs which represented six different leadership dimensions. The dimensions were task master, dedicated manager, insightful expert, genuinely warm, introvert and polished. His personal construct system is well differentiated and includes a broad set of traits and behaviors characteristic of leaders.

Francis is a senior manager in a large manufacturing company and over the past 25 years, has worked in a variety of marketing and general management functions. He is currently responsible for marketing and administrative functions of a large division, and has eight direct reports. His eight constructs represent six dimensions, task master, planner, insightful expert, genuinely warm, visionary and inspirational. Like Don, his personal construct system is well differentiated and seems to cover the full range of leadership behaviors described by Bass (1985).

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Social cognition literature argues that individuals seek information simplification to achieve cognitive economy, and use various information processing heuristic to make sense of the complex social environments. Limiting the social interactions to work settings, it was suggested that individuals have different

construct systems to receive and categorize leader behavior information. We further postulated that a person's schemata would achieve greater degrees of refinement and differentiation with experience. This was borne out in this study. Eleven distinct dimensions representing the categorization systems of the respondents were identified. The cognitive structures of the respondents ranged from very simple (one dimension) to well differentiated (six dimensions). For instance, the folk theories of leadership identified in this study could be exemplified by statements such as "show me a people-oriented person and I will show you a good leader" and "Tom is a dedicated manager and a fine leader."

Our results have several implications for understanding leadership in applied situations. To the extent that personal construct systems act as interpersonal filters affecting the perceptions of the observers, Kelly's (1955) theory of cognition provides an explanation of leadership emergence and perception. For example, an individual with effective ideas may not be able to implement them if not perceived as a leader by others. Being perceived as a leader may have a direct impact on acceptance of organizational goals and commitment, and produce a positive affect for subordinates.

Past research on ILTs have focused their attention on understanding subordinate perceptions of leadership. However, very little has been said about the role played by these categorization systems on the development of subjects' leadership style. It is conceivable that these perceptual filters affect the attitudes and values of people about leadership, thereby influencing their own leadership behaviors. They may only choose to display leadership behaviors consistent with their naive theories of leadership which may or may not be in the best interests of their subordinates and the organization. Since the categorization system provides the framework for organizing new information, their mental models of leadership may also affect their ability to change their leadership style.

The influence of the subjects' background and experience on their mental models of leadership is best illustrated by two cases. Karl, the specialist, has worked for a community-oriented non-profit organization for over ten years and his leadership categorization system included three related dimensions: people-oriented, visionary and inspirational. As a supervisor of students involved in community projects, he probably sees these factors as the important characteristics of effective leaders. In contrast, Francis, the senior manager with diverse functional training, has a well differentiated categorization system consisting of six dimensions spanning the full range of leadership behaviors. While this is a qualitative finding and hence may lack generalizability, the fact that the sample was heterogenous and the content of the folk theories are comparable to that found by Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz (1994), lends some support for the possibility that the personal construct systems are influenced by the focal person's background and experience.

As noted earlier, personal constructs or categories could lead to systematic distortion in behavioral ratings. These folk theories of leadership, by which subordinates evaluate leader behavior, could lead to an equivalent effect on behavioral ratings even though clear distinctions could exist in traits, behavior,

and performance. Awareness on the part of the leader of these individual differences in forming perceptions of leadership could assist the leader in exhibiting appropriate leader behaviors that maximizes the cognitive consistency of their subordinates.

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APPENDIX I  
LIST OF REFERENCE CONCEPTS

Intelligent	Goal-Oriented
Honest	Enthusiastic
Outgoing	Insightful
Clarifies Ideas	Successful
Aggressive	Persuasive
Determined	Strong Convictions
Industrious	Wants Peace
Concern for others	Persistent
Decisive	Courageous
Dedicated	Forceful
Well-Groomed	Generous
Rewards efforts	Optimistic
Informed	Loyal
Open-Minded	Organized
Strong Character	Outspoken
Athletic	Trustworthy
Believable	Tough
Charismatic	Planned
Competitive	Inspires Others
Has a Vision	Humanitarian
Cooperative	Coach
Directing	Always Present